Lincoln Lore

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LINCOLN AND THE INDIANS (Cont.)

The effect of Whipple's letter on Abraham Lincoln is unknown, but Lincoln did at least acknowledge the letter. Writing on March 27, 1862, the President stated that he had "commended the matter of which it treats to the special attention of the Secretary of the Interior." This letter may have had a significant effect on subsequent events because of its timeliness. Pleas to show mercy to the convicted Indians eight or nine months later may have seemed less to be instances of special pleading and more to be admonitions to a forewarned government. In August, Whipple's letter of March 6 could be seen as a prophecy of trouble and one that laid the blame not on the wanton passions of the red man but upon the inept policies of the white.

Whipple had good connections in Washington because General Henry W. Halleck was his cousin. Through Halleck he gained a personal audience with President Lincoln in the Autumn of 1862 after the Sioux uprising occurred. What is known of the meeting comes entirely from Whipple's autobiography:

> General Halleck went with me to the President, to whom I gave an account of the outbreak, its causes, and the suffering and evil which followed in its wake. Mr. Lincoln had known something of Indian warfare in the Black Hawk War. He was deeply moved. He was a man of profound sympathy, but he usually relieved the strain upon his feelings by telling a story. When I had finished he said:—
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> "Bishop, a man thought that monkeys could pick cotton better than negroes could because they were quicker and their fingers smaller. He turned a lot of them into his cotton field, but he found that it took two overseers to watch one monkey. It needs more than one honest man to watch one Indian Agent."

Whipple's knowledge of Lincoln's more profound reaction was second or third hand:

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The photograph shows John G. Nicolay (standing) in Minnesota on August 24, 1862. The Minnesota Historical Society has tentatively identified the man seated as Indian commissioner William P. Dole. Both men gave Lincoln information about the Sioux uprising.

A short time after this, President Lincoln, meeting a friend from Illinois, asked him if their old friend, Luther Dearborn, had not moved to Minnesota. Receiving an affirmative answer, he said: "When you see Lute, ask him if he knows Bishop Whipple. He came out here the other day and talked with me about the rascality of this Indian business until I felt it down to my boots. If we get through this war, and I live, *this Indian system shall be reformed!*"

Anyone with any acquaintance with Lincoln literature knows to be suspicious of anecdotes which come second hand, especially if one of the parties involved remains nameless in the anecdote. It should be noted that Whipple reported a much more non-committal response from the President's personal interview. Nevertheless, as will be argued later, there is some evidence that Whipple's efforts may have had some effect on President Lincoln.

As Whipple suggested when he said that Lincoln had had some experience himself with Indian warfare, the personal factors in Lincoln's decision should not be ignored. There was little in Lincoln's personal background to lead one to believe that his opinions of Indians would have differed from John Nicolay's. If Nicolay had lived too close to Illinois's frontier days to have any "sentimental illusions" about Indians, Lincoln, who was older than Nicolay, had lived even closer to Illinois's frontier era. In fact, Lincoln had enlisted in the Illinois militia in 1832 to fight in the Black Hawk War. Lincoln had marched, fought off mosquitoes, had his horse stolen, and in general endured the hardships of a military campaign (as both a captain and a private), though he never saw an Indian or fired a shot. Still, his response when Indian troubles had brewed had been to join up and fight.

However innocuous Lincoln's personal experiences with Indian warfare had been (and later he would make fun of them in Congress), there was a reason why he might have harbored quite a grudge against Indians. Lincoln knew very little about his personal family background and does not seem to have cared about it a great deal, but one thing he did know and mentioned repeatedly: his grandfather on the Lincoln side had been killed by Indians in 1784. Lincoln blamed this for the shortcomings he found in his father Thomas. Thus in an autobiographical sketch he wrote in 1860, Lincoln said: "Thomas, the youngest son, and father of the present subject, by the early death of his father, and very narrow circumstances of his mother, even in childhood was a wandering laboring boy, and grew up litterally without education. He never did more in the way of writing than to bunglingly sign his own name." In a way, Lincoln blamed the Indians for making an orphan of his father and therefore depriving him of a proper education and upbringing. Moreover, Lincoln knew that the Indians were capable of murder, for his grandfather had not died in battle. As Abraham Lincoln himself explained, "he was killed by Indians, not in battle, but by stealth, when he was laboring to open a farm in the forest."

Yet the decision Lincoln made reflected little of the advice he received and none of his personal background. Lincoln announced his decision in the case of the condemned Sioux Indians to Congress this way:

> Anxious to not act with so much clemency as to encourage another outbreak on the one hand, nor with so much severity as to be real cruelty on the other, I caused a careful examination of the records of trials to be made, in view of first ordering the execution of such as had been proved guilty of violating females. Contrary to my expectations, only two of this class was found. I then directed a further examination, and a classification of all who were proven to have participated in *massacres*, as distinguished from participation in *battles*. This class numbered forty and included the two convicted of female violation.

As a result of Lincoln's decision, only thirty-eight Indians were hanged; the rest were kept prisoner a while and some were eventually pardoned.

Lincoln had delegated the sifting and winnowing task to George C. Whiting and Francis H. Ruggles. Although Lincoln's message had claimed to distinguish essentially between Indians guilty of rape and murder and Indians who had engaged in military battles, the final decision apparently retained something of the original desideratum Lincoln used when replying to Pope's telegram. Some of the thirty-eight condemned Indians were more ringleaders than murderers. In the list he presented to Congress, for example, appeared this particular charge against Rda-in-yan-kna: "Took a prominent part in all the battles, including the attack on New Ulm, leading and urging the Indians forward, and opposing the giving up of the captives when it was proposed by others." Still another, Hay-pee-don, may have been sentenced to death for mutilating a corpse and firing "many shots at the fort."

Edmund S. Morgan points out in a recent American history textbook, *The National Experience*, that Indian victories in American history are generally known as massacres. When Lincoln distinguished between Indian massacres and Indian battles, he made a distinction that Americans did not often make at that time, and, as Mr. Morgan reminds us, that Americans still have trouble making. Moreover, Lincoln made the distinction in de-

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Another photograph taken in Minnesota during Nicolay's visit there in 1862 shows the President's secretary taking some shooting practice. To judge from this picture and the weapons Nicolay carried in the picture on the first page, one would have to say Nicolay apparently felt he was supposed to look the part of a rugged frontiersman. Whether he also felt compelled to adopt the frontiermen's attitudes toward Indians is an interesting question. However, Nicolay's account of "The Sioux War," which appeared in *The Continental Monthly* in February of 1863, was more temperate in its recommendations for future Indian policy than General Pope's advice and clearly discounted the idea that the war had been planned in advance by the Indians.

fiance of most of the information from the field (which had informed him only of murders, rapes, and outrages) and most of the advice from witnesses, influential politicians, and even a close personal advisor.

Two factors probably influenced Lincoln. Perhaps the fact that the Indian uprising occurred during the Civil War served to clarify the legal issues involved. Certainly Lincoln was thinking about the characteristics and consequences of a legal state of war. He treated the Civil War as both a war and a rebellion. Had Lincoln treated it strictly as a rebellion, he would have hanged all Confederate prisoners and he could not have declared a naval blockade recognizable in international law. Had Lincoln treated it strictly as a war, it would have meant that the Confederacy was a legal belligerent government or perhaps a nation, a position that would have utterly undermined the administration's ideological basis for the war. Moreover, Congress never declared war. The position of the Lincoln administration was not exactly consistent, but it was one that permitted enough use of the war power to win the war and free the slaves without at the same time unleashing incredible atrocities.

The Sioux outbreak was a similarly complex legal situation. On the one hand, it resembled a war between independent nations. In 1862, Indians were not United States citizens. They were dealt with by treaties just as any sovereign foreign nation was dealt with. Thus Indians who fought in pitched battles with white soldiers were perhaps entitled to the status of prisoners of war rather than traitors or murderers. On the other hand, Congress did not declare war, and Indian tribes were not sovereign states in the same sense that France and England were because they were forbidden from entering into treaties with other foreign nations besides the United States. John Marshall had said in a Supreme Court decision in 1831 that the Cherokee Nation, although it was a "State," was not a "foreign State" but a "domestic dependent nation." In a way, Lincoln treated the Sioux in a constitutionally inconsistent way, much as he treated the Confederate States in a constitutionally inconsistent way, in order to gain deterrence of future Sioux outbreaks without at the same time causing atrocities.

Charles E. Flandrau, although he disagreed with the wisdom of Lincoln's actions, thought (many years after the event) that the pressures of Civil War politics did have a great deal to do with Lincoln's decision.

> I have my own views also of the reasons for the action of the general Government in eliminating from the list of the condemned all but thirty-nine [one of these was later reprieved, so that thirty-eight were hanged]. It was not because these thirty-nine were more guilty than the rest, but because we were engaged in a great civil war, and the eyes of the world were upon us. Had these three hundred men been executed, the charge would undoubtedly have been made by the South that the North was murdering prisoners of war, and the authorities at Washington knew full well that the other nations of the earth were not capable of making the proper discrimination. . . .

Flandrau also mentioned the notion that was prevalent in Minnesota that Lincoln's mind had been poisoned by a lot of sickly sentimentalists from the East. Flandrau believed Lincoln got this kind of advice, but he did not say that Lincoln was heeding it in his decision in December of 1862. As Flandrau put it, "While this court martial was in session, the news of its proceedings reached the Eastern cities, and a great outcry was raised that Minnesota was contemplating a dreadful massacre of Indians. Many influential bodies of well-intentioned but ill-informed people besieged President Lincoln to put a stop to the proposed executions." A much more capable Minnesota historian than Flandrau, writing over thirty years later than Flandrau wrote, apparently put some stock in these same provincial fears, writing with a sneer: "No sooner was it known that President Lincoln had taken the disposition of the condemned Indians into his own hands than he was inundated with 'appeals': appeals for mercy, on the one hand, from friends of the Indian who never had seen one, from people opposed to the death penalty, and from those who regarded the convicts as prisoners of war." In fact, the existence of these appeals remains largely unverified, and Abraham Lincoln did not submit them to the Senate, when it asked for information about the case, though he submitted, for example, the quite unsentimental appeal from the citizens of St. Paul.

One exception, of course, would be the advice that Lincoln received from Bishop Whipple, whom the people of Minnesota regarded as an "enthusiastic tenderfoot" in Indian matters. The principal evidence for Whipple's influence is second and third hand, but there are some indications from sources other than the Bishop's own autobiography that Lincoln may have been influenced from that quarter.

In his Annual Message to Congress of December 1, 1862, Lincoln had occasion to mention the Indian troubles in Minnesota. He admitted that "How this outbreak was induced is not definitely known," and he informed Congress that the "people of that State manifest much anxiety for the removal of the tribes beyond the limits of the state." Yet, in conclusion he added, "I submit for your especial consideration whether our Indian system shall not be remodelled. Many wise and good men have impressed me with the belief that this can be profitably done." Of course, his message was silent on the type of reform he proposed, but the Indian war did suggest reform in the Indian system to him. A year later, Lincoln's Annual Message carried another appeal for reform, this time with a clue to the nature of reform be desired:

> Sound policy and our imperative duty to these wards of the government demand our anxious and constant attention to their material well-being, to the progress in the arts of civilization, and, above all, to that moral training which, under the blessing of Divine Providence, will confer upon them the elevated and sanctifying influences, the hopes and consolation of the Christian faith.
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> I suggested in my last annual message the propriety of remodelling our Indian system. Subsequent events have satisfied me of its necessity. The details set forth in the report of the Secretary evince the urgent need for immediate legislative action.

The key lies in Lincoln's use of the term "wards" to describe the Indians' status *vis-a-vis* the United States government. It was basically a reformer's word. Moreover, it was a word which described perfectly the relationship to the Indians which Bishop Whipple desired the government to assume. He argued for a more paternalistic government, a government which would not treat the Indians as "equals," a government which would furnish them with supplies in kind but could not trust them to spend money on their own, and a government that would treat them kindly and fairly. In short, he wanted Indians to become wards of the government. Whipple's letter to Buchanan used the very word, suggesting, "First, whether, in future, treaties cannot be made so that the Government shall occupy a paternal character, treating the Indians as their wards."

When Lincoln addressed a group of Indian chiefs directly in Washington in March of 1863, he avoided saying that the Indians should adopt the white men's way of life, but he did tell them "what has made the difference in our way of living" so that the whites were "numerous and prosperous." It was agriculture. When pressed for advice, he said, "I can only say that I can see no way in which your race is to become as numerous and prosperous as the white race except by living as they do, by the cultivation of the earth." Whipple's recommendation to Lincoln had urged that the Indians be granted individual lots of land held as private property and that they be supplied the tools and training to become successful farmers.

Indian reformers later in the century would urge many of the same things. G. P. Manypenny's landmark book about Indian reform was, significantly, entitled *Our Indian Wards* (1879). Henry Whipple went on to write a preface to Helen Hunt Jackson's famous treatment of the history of the United State's dealings with Indians, *A Century of Dishonor* (1881). Whether Lincoln would have joined Helen Hunt Jackson's crusade for the Indian had he lived, can only be a matter of speculation.

One thing, however, seems clear. Lincoln did earn a

reputation for being "soft" on Indians. Charles Flandrau said so in 1891:

> An Indian never forgets what he regards an injury, and never forgives an enemy. It is my opinion that all the troubles that have transpired since the liberation of these Indians, with the tribes inhabiting the Western plains and mountains, have grown out of the counsels of these savages. The only proper course to have pursued with them, when it was decided not to hang them, was to have exiled them to some remote post,—say, the Dry Tortugas,—where communication with their people would have been impossible. . . .

Flandrau blamed Lincoln's clemency for all the Sioux troubles that ensued further west after the Civil War.

Indeed, Lincoln gained his reputation at least as early as 1864. The memoirs of an Indian fighter named Eugene F. Ware mention this conversation about some Indian troubles in the West in 1864:

> During the day Lieutenant Rankin came and rode with me, and we talked over the Indian council. Rankin said the General [named Mitchell] was angry and mortified over it; that if it had been successful it would have been a great achievement and much to his reputation and credit; that it was not Mitchell's idea, but that a lot of preachers had got at President Lincoln and insisted that the preachers should have the control of the Indian situation, and that the various sects should divide the control among themselves—that is to say, the Methodists should have so much jurisdiction, the Catholics so much, the Baptists so much, and so on, and that they were worrying Lincoln a good deal, and that they wanted him to take immediate steps to have an universal Indian peace between all the Indians. Lincoln yielded to much of it and had sent for Mitchell and told him to take up the matter and see what he could do.

Friends of the Indian and Indian fighters alike seem to have agreed that on the Indian question the preachers "got at President Lincoln."

Lincoln's opinions on Indians reached almost mythic proportions by 1932, when The American Missionary Association published a pamphlet by one George W. Hinman, entitled "Lincoln Sunday, February 14, 1932: Lincoln and the Indians." The pamphlet was a script for a responsive reading for a worship service. The American Missionary Association ran schools and churches for Negroes and Indians, and the Superintendent was to ask his pupils, "When did the Dakota [Sioux] Indians in large numbers turn from their pagan religion to Christianity?" The pupils were to reply, "Only after the Minnesota Massacre in 1862, when four hundred Indians were imprisoned in the Federal Prison at Mankato, Minn., and condemned to death for their part in the attack on white settlers." The service continued:

> *Supt.*—What did President Lincoln do for the Dakota Indian prisoners?
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> *Pupils*—In the dark years of 1862, the second year of the Civil War, when the future of the Union was very uncertain and Lincoln was pondering the question of the emancipation of the slaves as a war measure, he took his valuable time to study the reports of the military trials of the four hundred Dakota Indians accused of sharing in the Minnesota Massacre.
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> *Supt.*—And what was his decision?
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> *Pupils*—After going over all the evidence he decided that only thirty-eight Indians, positively known to have engaged in actual massacres, should be hung . . . .
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> *Supt.*—What did Lincoln say about the Indians in a message to Congress?
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> *Pupils*—He advocated a revision of the whole government Indian service. He resisted the appeals for drastic action against the Indians, objecting to a "severity which would be real cruelty."
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> *Supt.*—What was one of Lincoln's famous statements, which he applied to Indians in the same spirit as to those of his own race?
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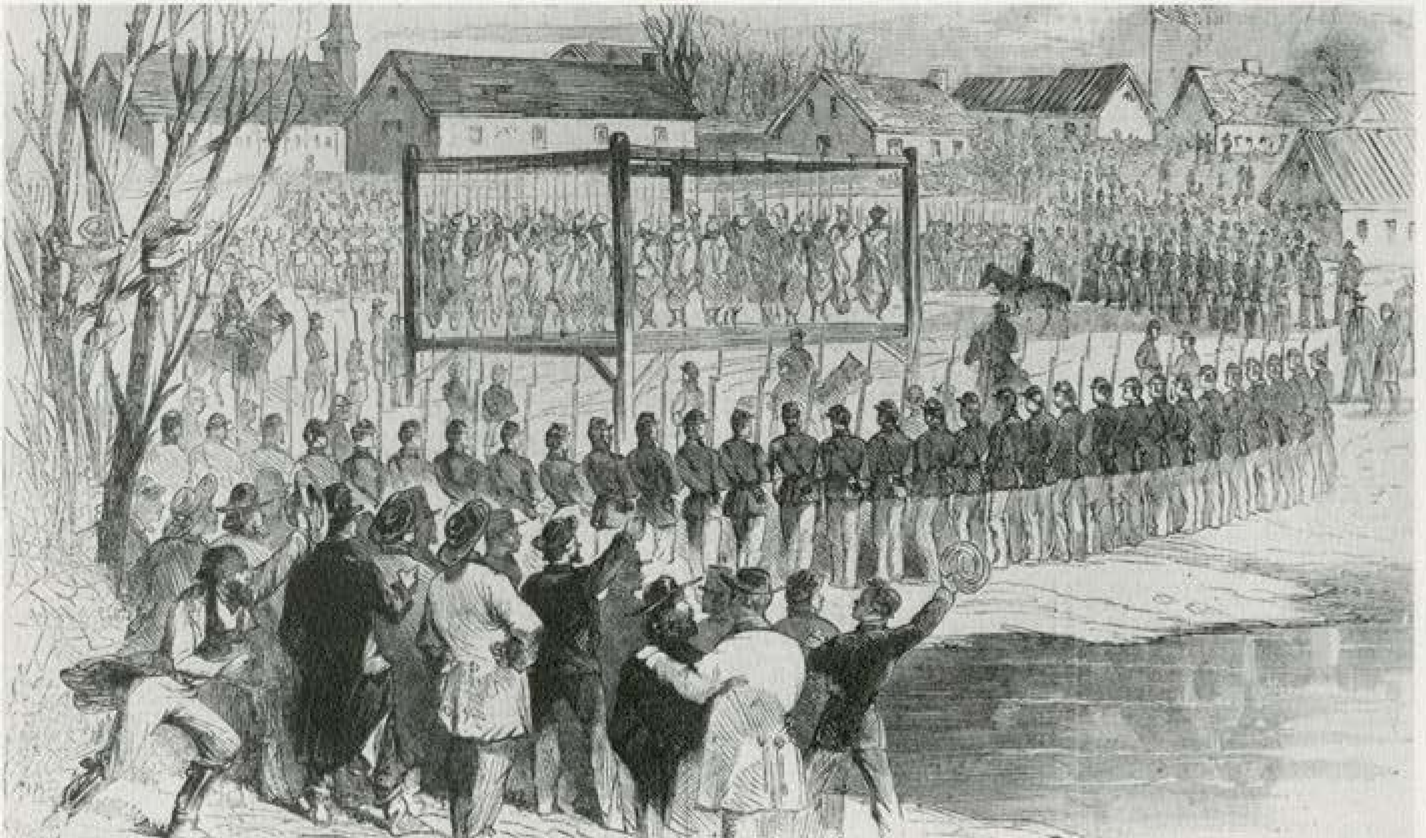
> *Pupils*—"With malice toward none and charity for all."

The missionaries erred in regard to the number of Indians condemned and saved, but they, and perhaps some of their pupils as well, did not forget what many historians have, Lincoln's actions towards the Minnesota Sioux Indians in 1862.



From the Lincoln National Life Foundation

This picture of the hanging in Mankato appeared in *Harper's Weekly* on January 17, 1863. The large number of soldiers were present to restrain the crowds. Note that the observers wave their hats as though celebrating.